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a step-by-step guide on beating perfectionism and getting started

MARIA EDUARDA
MAR 1

READ IN APP

“the problem with maria is that she acts like a lazy soccer player. instead of practicing to consistently score goals in every match, she will start from a place of 0 skill, become obsessed with scoring a goal, get absolutely no rest until she does so, and then get bored and loose interest after the first time she nets the ball.”

i’ve never played soccer but i did have a violin teacher that taught me a lot about failure.

step 1: failing

i remember the first time i was held accountable for the terrible way i dealt with failure was more or less one year after i started learning the violin. back in those days, i was working on the rieding violin concerto. my previous study habits never taught me anything about discipline. in fact, there was nothing in

the world i hated more than repeating the same thing over and over and over in hopes to get it right. it felt unnatural. it felt… stupid.

given my small town, only child context, i was born a comparatively smart kid. by consequence, this also means i became a comparatively lazy child. don't get me wrong, i was involved with 1001 hobbies and had lots of physical energy. however, because i quickly became used to getting everything right at first, facing setbacks in a healthy way was something i deeply struggled with.

speaking of the violin, because of my not-extraordinary-but-existent musical talent, my first weeks learning the concerto went pretty smoothly: even barely touching my instrument, i was learning the notes and getting most of the rhythms correctly. professor yara, positively impressed, asks me about my study habits, and i play along:

> "how many hours do you practice per week?"
>
> "uhm… 1 every day, so i guess around 7." [absolutely not true]
>
> "that's great to build a habit! 1 hour might seem like a lot now, but when we enjoy what we're doing it passes by very quickly."

to enjoy what one is doing… until that point, no one had ever talked about enjoyment to me in my whole life. i just did what i did because it looked cool and it made people go "wow". adults openly and directly speaking about what makes them happy was not a setting i was familiar with.

i think this became particularly evident when, in the following weeks, yara noticed i was barely improving and started asking questions related to what i felt when playing. i remember coming up on the spot with ok answers, as good of a yapper as i've always been. but everything was very far from genuine, and there was no way my imagination could go on forever.

yara was an angel. for basically 2 years, she truly believed in me even when i showed absolutely no particular talent or motivation for the violin. in the meantime, i started more formal music studies in fêgo camargo, the city's conservatory that attracted many artists from the countryside of são paulo. but as all reasonable things, of course even her patience got to a limit. finally tired after one more class dealing with my bullshit, she asks me with tears in

her eyes to see my mom. nervous as i was, i ask my progenitor to follow me into the classroom, and while i packed my things to go back home, i listen to their full conversation, which goes something like this:

> “adriana, for how much time does she practice every day?”
>
> “practice? i’ve barely heard the violin in our house for a while.”
>
> “that’s it, that’s why she can’t get better! the problem with maria is that she acts like a lazy soccer player. instead of practicing to consistently score goals in every match, she will start from a place of 0 skill, become obsessed with scoring a goal, get absolutely no rest until she does so, and then get bored and loose interest after the first time she nets the ball. this is not sustainable for an art like music. there is truly nowhere to go if she is not up to practice every day - talent can only take her so far.”
>
> “i agree. what now?”
>
> “as much as it hurts me, i can’t have her as a student if she keeps acting this way. i could recommend another teacher for you to go after, but i’ll no longer be her instructor and i don’t think no one in the conservatory would like to take her as well.”
>
> …
>
> “darling, things can’t remain the way they are.” [yara tells me looking straight into my eyes. that “darling” was personal. it spoke to my soul]

and there it went: my effortless perfection halo, my “look at me! i’ve never failed!” mask. turns out i could write a whole book about what my trajectory with the violin meant to me and in what ways it transformed me as a person, but i like to see this specific point as the beginning of an inner transformation that i didn’t fully process until writing this post. it’s a story about discipline serving, for the first time, as a vector for my success, and how much good the investment of healthy levels of dedication could do to both my performance and my self-esteem. the violin might have been my first major failure, but it was also my first major success. after internalizing yara’s advice, i actually became decent in music and unlocked the perception that some desirable

skills can only be developed out of my comfort zone. i found meaning in challenge. i loved something.

still, my behavior in high school illustrates i didn't fully buy this idea.

step 2: (not) keeping up

after moving to rio, financial and logistic barriers had me quit the violin. at that point, going into the final year of middle school without the thing that defined me the most, it was hard to not feel behind. as soon as cmrj (the military school of rio de janeiro[1]) welcomed me as a student, i got in contact with kids competing in swimming tournaments since they were 4, or math olympiads since they were born. i didn't let this discourage me from starting from scratch in new activities, but something about internalizing that there would still be a substantial amount of work in order for me to get decent felt too awkward to keep up with, and that's one of the reasons why only a couple of my high school hobbies and skills actually made out of the years i spent wearing a uniform.

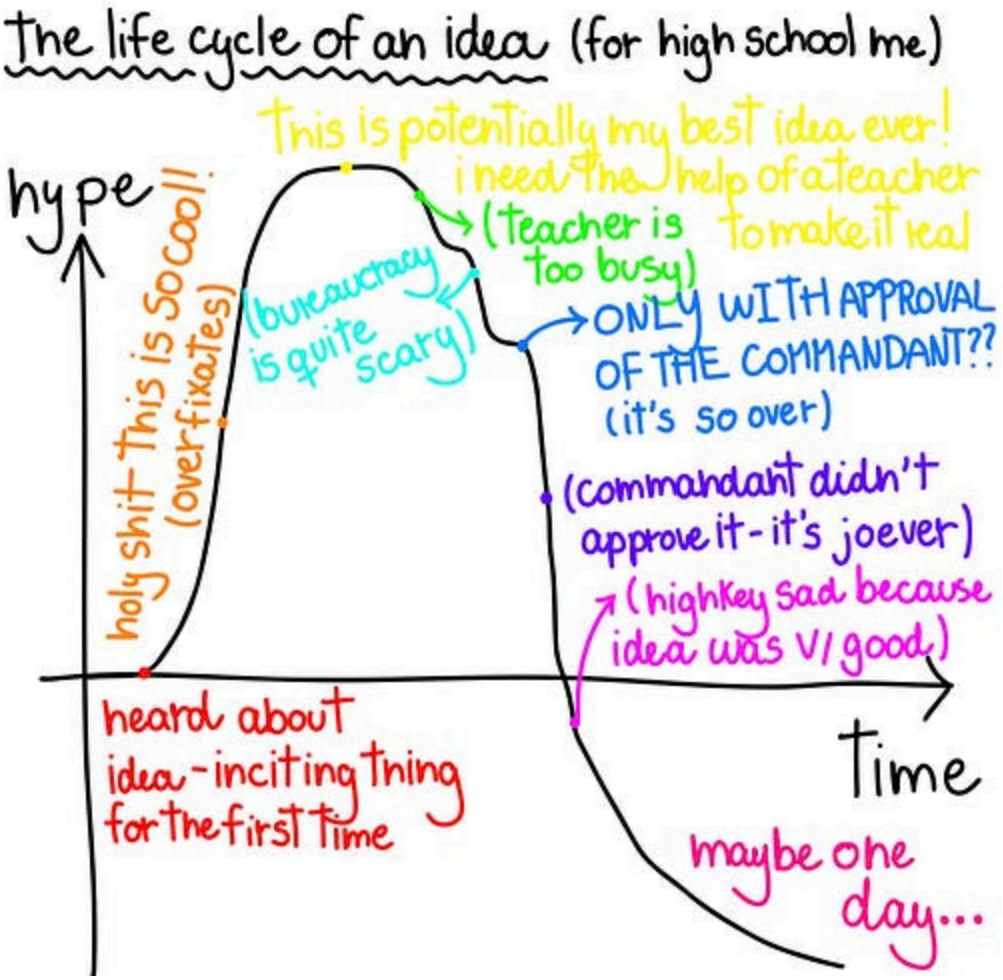
in the military school, i felt the pressure to be the best in everything all of the time. this was mainly self-driven, but external forces also played a role - mind you, there were social incentives for that. within the school multiverse, that would mean more trinkets and curios to add to your shirt[2], or the chance to get some level of formal hierarchical title. in brazil, a culture in which there is no particular abundance of opportunities, the "one shot" mindset makes sense and is very well celebrated. still, there is also a fundamental lack of infrastructure that makes it hard for you to be carried by momentum, and in the context of cmrj that was even more evident because of the bureaucratic apparatus surrounding the institution. most of the time i truly felt like josef k. in the trial[3]. the system can be much heavier than it seems for an outsider and i'm kind of sick of some ideologies that try to gaslight you otherwise, but that's a story for another time.

point is there is only a certain level of determination / agency / entrepreneurial drive[4] that a suffocating setting such as the military school allows for, and though this post is aimed to be harsh on myself, i truly believe it was reasonable for me to be limited to my environment in those circumstances, especially not having a reference or major inspiration in mind. most of the success tales perpetuated in the military are about people that within the

system found their objectives, rather than people who found the way to their goals outside of the system and had to deal with it while pursuing what truly made sense to them. and this matters because it's exactly how sterile and difficult everything felt that made me drift even further away from taking advantage from the burst of energy that comes with getting started. i would want to accept the challenge of creating a club, but would get lost in all the paperwork i had to fill out to accomplish that. i would want to ask a teacher for further feedback in my performance, but the physical exhaustion of a 4 to 7 (yes, a 4:00 am to 7:00 pm schedule) would refrain us from even going more in depth in class concepts and discuss extra readings.

for me, failing in the military school was not only discouraged: it felt painful; it had "serious" consequences. responding "i don't know" in all honesty would lead to some degree of disdain and an association with laziness, while faking knowledge would earn you pats on the back. asking for help would make people question your intelligence, while struggling by yourself and, as a consequence, not becoming as good as you could, would keep you in the game. ego was our currency, and people would do what it takes to survive. with little openings for students to make their voices heard, being perceived as the best was much more important than being the best - the point was that authorities needed to think of your name first whenever a mission came up. of course personal branding and image are important, but when they become a goal in itself it's time to stop and rethink. from an environment of musicians and people like professor yara, extremely passionate and mindful about their missions, i was now among kids that besides being extremely ambitious didn't even get a chance to be passionate. that allows for a dangerous combo.

following the rules of the game imposed to me, if i had no chance of being the best in stupidly small timeframes, it wasn't even worth trying. hence why i quit the orienteering team when more talented students joined it, or why i didn't even bother to keep studying programming since some kids were light-years ahead of me, or even why i didn't join the dance club because i told myself people would laugh at my moves. i know everything has its learning curve, but cmrj made me disbelieve in the concepts of momentum and genuine improvement, and that hurt me so deeply that the scars are still visible (specially under a lot of pressure).


The life cycle of an idea (for high school me)
hype
Time
holy shit this is so cool!! (overfixates)
this is potentially my best idea ever! i need the help of a teacher to make it real
(teacher is too busy)
(bureaucracy is quite scary)
ONLY WITH APPROVAL OF THE COMMANDANT?? (it's so over)
(commandant didn't approve it - it's joever)
(highkey sad because idea was v/ good)
heard about idea-inciting thing for the first time
maybe one day...

the physics is too complex to explain, but momentum fails you if you're a brazilian teenager in a military school

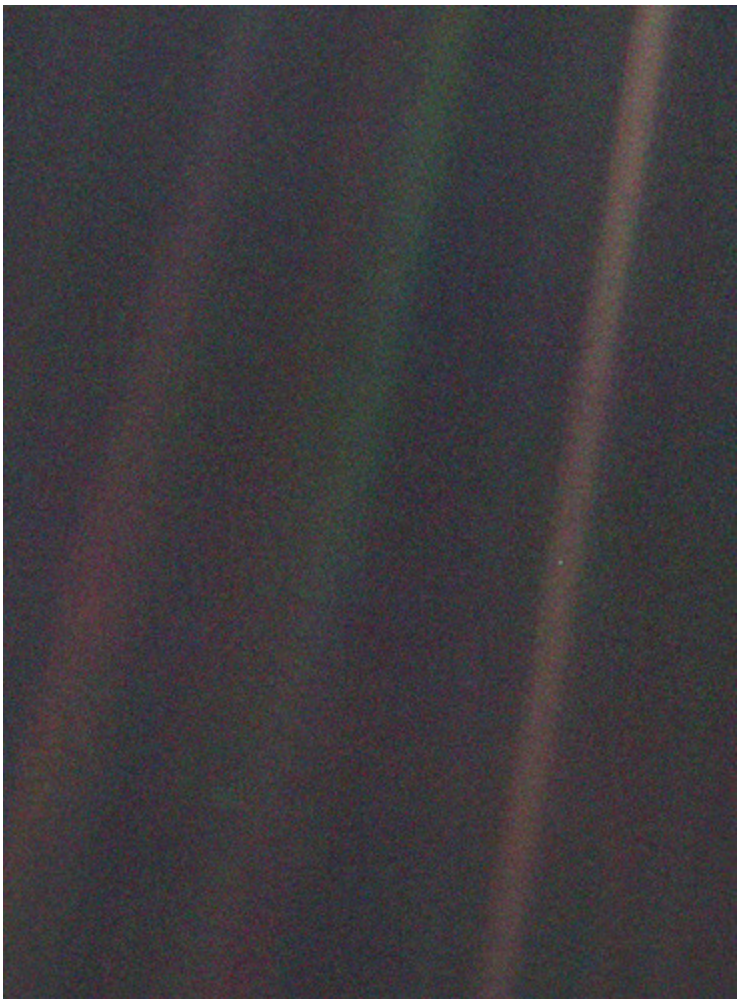
it wouldn't be until i started interacting more with communities outside of brazil that i found out it was ok to be learning and improving. when i went to warp in 2023, "i don't know" was, for the first time, framed to me as something normal rather than a sign of defeat.

now in college, i expected being comfortable with learning would also be an easy task, but i was proven wrong. of course it's much easier than it was in cmrj, but still not quite as easy as it was in an environment such as warp. maybe it's the college i ended up choosing to attend, but every day i spend here i am haunted by the ghosts of my past. where would i be if i kept coding? what doors would be open to me if i didn't quit orienteering? what crazy choreographies would i know if i didn't self-impose that i'm shit at dancing? even sucking up my ego and asking that stupid question in a classroom feels like a challenge to me, but i'd say i'm succeeding in this exercise that is both a humility checkpoint and a liberating motion. if anything, the graveyard of things i didn't even get started on serves as fuel, and i finally

came to terms that the frustration of stagnation drains me more than my fear of being ridiculous.

after all… what is even ridiculous?

step 3: getting started



earth as a pale blue dot

at the same time that being in contact with all these super cracked kids at harvard feeds my “what if’s?” regarding choices from the past, the idea of being the worst at something in a room is paradoxically uncomfortable and comforting. on the brighter side, it helps me take myself less seriously. it shows me a lot of things really aren’t that deep. it helps me see that context and background do matter, and that there’s nothing wrong with the controlled exposure to the ridicule that comes with engaging in a new challenge. not being the best at anything and struggling to even do the bare minimum is new to me, and new is refreshing, but i claim one can only not get carried away by

the negative emotions of this process if steps 1 and 2 of this guide have already happened.

i'm not there yet. i still think i haven't gone wrong enough, and i'm still trying to search for the healthy balance between getting started and getting good. i do wish i had failed more, and i do regret being attached to my personal image to the extent of convincing myself i didn't want to do things just because i wasn't good at them. however, this doesn't mean i'm not happy with where i am right now; my past serves as a powerful compass to conceptualize the person i strive to be: a good dancer, a decent programmer, a healthy athlete, someone who is not scared of sharing their writing with the world.

on espr '23, gavin taught a class on what's stopping people[5] and introduced me to substack. still, it took me basically 2 years to actually get started, mostly because i feared. i feared i wouldn't be worth listening. i fear my writing would be underwhelming compared to all the good stuff that is already in the wild.

but i don't care anymore.

i do fear my writing will not be as good as you (yes, you!) imagined it was. actually, i really do fear people will read this and not feel anything - indifference is so much worse than any negative emotion. to some degree, i also feel scared my blog won't be the representation brazil actually deserves, particularly when i get to talk about topics related to my identity and my nationality. but i can't do this forever. i can't allow the existence of ideas of me out there missing fundamental information, fundamental context, fundamental opinions. the deeper i venture in the lands of self-improvement, the more i see people more skilled than me, and the more i hate hiding my essence: my most precious belonging, exactly my only unique trait. it's time to get real. it's time to output my own version of "hello world!".

it was only after realizing i already had 21 (update by the time i publish: 27) drafts in my posts that i decided to actually put in the effort to finish this article. it is personal, it is vulnerable, but it almost feels like a meta-text: meditations on perfectionism that took so long to come out exactly because of my perfectionism. maybe that's the whole point of writing them anyways.

instead of a lament, let these words be an ode to a new chapter: the one in which maria for once is open to failing, asking for help… and getting started.

thank you andrew for hyping me up for my own post and zz for making me think about how ironic it was that i hadn't posted it yet. thank you núbia and gabriel for confirming my post was relatable even a continent away. thank you angie for being my first subscriber, and thank you dani for being my everything.

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1 the fact that one out of the two "notorious events" in the school's wikipedia page is the suicide of a student speaks volumes about what the vibes are :P.

2 the military schools have all sorts of medals and badges that students can wear on their uniform if they are part of an organization, won specific honors, etc. symbols are quite a huge deal in the broader brazilian army context, and in cmrj they represent both an institutional recognition and an asset of personal identity.

3 by that i basically mean being so lost in the bureaucracy and the technicalities of a mission that you lose track of what is even the point.

4 really went for all different extremes of the spectrum with the links here lol.

5 this post truly does not compare to the actual class, but it gives you some idea of what goes on.

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